

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

The beliefs of teachers are the most significant factor that they help to shape their practice of teaching and classroom management. These beliefs which are formed by their attitude and principles that they hold about the students, the physical environment of the class, and the subject that they are teaching though usually held on an implicit level, they strongly influence their decisions, behaviors and strategies of teaching (Kagan, 1992). explaining They how are teachers a perceive statement teaching of and a learning teacher's process most (Fives held et convictions al., and 2019). vision In for education and therefore help in the context of EFL teaching, these beliefs can strongly affect the practice in the classroom, not only the method of teaching, but also the motivation and engagement of the students as well as their language achievement.

The Kurikulum Merdeka which is which the emphasizes current on curriculum competency in based Indonesia learning. is This an curriculum approach is to meant learning to encourage the development of a more engaging and student-based learning environment which will enable the teachers to vary their strategies in order to accommodate the diverse needs of the learners (Depdikbud, 2021). Teachers are encouraged to apply differentiated instruction strategies, a method that has proven effective in addressing individual differences among learners, particularly in EFL contexts. Differentiated instruction, central to the Kurikulum Merdeka, involves tailoring educational experiences to each student's unique needs, abilities, and interests.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching method designed to accommodate the unique learning needs of individual students, making it particularly effective in diverse EFL classrooms (Tomlinson, 1999). Teachers' understanding of differentiation often grows with experience and

through professional development, which in turn makes them more responsive to students' unique learning styles. Positive attitudes toward differentiation, as studies show, enhance both teacher efficacy and student outcomes, promoting more effective teaching and learning experiences (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Differentiation, however, requires not only the belief in its value but also a deep understanding of practical strategies to apply it in varied classroom settings.

In EFL teaching, differentiation offers both opportunities and challenges, as it provides tailored learning experiences based on students' readiness, language proficiency, and interest levels. Teachers often find that strategies like tiered assignments, flexible grouping, and adapting materials are effective ways to address diverse learning needs in EFL classrooms. These approaches allow teachers to design more targeted activities, promoting better engagement and language skill development (Naka, 2018). Teachers' beliefs about the value of these methods impact their success in applying differentiation effectively in the classroom.

Teachers' beliefs also shape their choice of pedagogical methods in EFL classrooms. Many EFL teachers find that interactive techniques, such as group discussions, problem-solving, and communicative activities, are more effective than traditional lecture-based methods in engaging students (Hartanti, Babikkoi, & Iskandar, 2018). Such methods align with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which encourages student-centered learning environments that facilitate language acquisition. This flexibility allows teachers to implement a wider variety of engaging, communicative activities, tailored to meet their students' needs and preferences.

However, implementing differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms under the Kurikulum Merdeka framework is not without challenges. Studies have highlighted issues such as limited time, high teacher workloads, and large class sizes, all of which can impede the practical application of differentiated strategies (Ahmed, 2022). The Kurikulum Merdeka provides teachers with a greater degree of flexibility in lesson design, but the success

of this approach depends on access to resources, ongoing planning, and professional development opportunities.

In EFL listening instruction specifically, differentiation requires a careful balance of accessibility and rigor. Teachers must design listening activities that match their students' language levels while maintaining engagement and language acquisition goals. This may involve adjusting audio materials' speed, using multimedia resources, or creating varying levels of difficulty in tasks. Such adjustments require teachers to have both a belief in differentiation's value and practical skills in adapting classroom materials (Smit & Humpert, 2012).

The Kurikulum Merdeka supports this differentiated approach by encouraging EFL teachers to adopt student-centered methods that foster a positive and flexible learning environment. This curriculum promotes a more joyful and relaxed atmosphere, where teachers can design and select content based on their students' individual needs and interests (Sulistiyani & Mulyono, 2022). The framework aligns with current theories in EFL pedagogy, emphasizing interactive and communicative methods as opposed to traditional, lecture-based approaches.

Studies show that differentiated instruction positively influences student learning by boosting motivation, engagement, and collaboration. This method creates an interactive and dynamic classroom atmosphere, supporting student development and encouraging active participation. For EFL students in particular, differentiated learning can enhance language skills and build confidence, providing them with a more supportive and engaging educational experience (Saputri, Anwar, & Maruf, 2023).

In the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka, teachers can employ practical strategies such as tiered assignments, flexible grouping, and integrating technology to address the diverse needs of their students. These methods enable teachers to tailor learning activities to match students' language levels and preferences, creating an inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). However, to be effective,

teachers must have both a strong commitment to differentiation principles and the resources necessary for implementation.

Given the significance of teachers' beliefs in shaping instructional choices, this study will explore how EFL teachers' beliefs about the Kurikulum Merdeka influence their approach to teaching EFL. Specifically, it will examine how teachers' values and assumptions impact the ways they incorporate differentiation strategies in their EFL classrooms. By understanding these beliefs, this study aims to provide insights into how EFL teachers interpret their role within a differentiated, student-centered framework.

Furthermore, this research will explore the challenges and strategies involved in using differentiated instruction in EFL settings. It will focus on identifying key obstacles, like time constraints and limited resources, and highlight areas where teachers may need additional support to successfully adapt their teaching practices to the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka.

This research explores how teacher beliefs impact the implementation of differentiated instruction in EFL contexts within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. It aims to examine the alignment between teachers' beliefs and curriculum objectives, identifying areas where support is needed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. The study will offer practical recommendations for EFL teachers to adapt their methods to meet diverse student needs, with implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and resource allocation to enhance differentiated EFL education in Indonesia.

In summary, this study examines the influence of teachers' beliefs on the practical application of differentiated instruction within the Kurikulum Merdeka, with a particular emphasis on EFL. The findings aim to inform future curriculum reforms and support the advancement of inclusive, student-centered EFL teaching practices in Indonesia.

B. Research Questions

Based on this research problem, it was formed to examine the research questions as stated in the problem:

1. How do teachers' beliefs regarding differentiated curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) shape their assumptions, values, and attitudes?
2. What are the challenges and strategies teachers face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, as influenced by their beliefs regarding differentiated curriculum?

C. Research Purposes

This research is intended to address the objectives in the problem based on the research question:

1. To find out teachers' beliefs regarding differentiated curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) shape their assumptions, values, and attitudes
2. To find out the challenges and strategies teachers face in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, as influenced by their beliefs regarding differentiated curriculum?

D. Research Significant

This research is expected to provide theoretical significance and practical significance.

1. Theoretical significance

This research helps us better understand how teachers' beliefs shape their teaching, especially when it comes to differentiating instruction in EFL classrooms. It builds on existing theories by showing how teachers' assumptions influence their use of strategies that cater to different student needs, particularly within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. The study also adds to our knowledge of how differentiated instruction works in EFL settings.

2. Practical significance

For teachers, this study offers practical strategies like tiered assignments and flexible grouping, which can improve teaching and student outcomes. It also highlights challenges, such as time and resource limitations, and shows the need for better support and professional development. The findings can guide curriculum developers and policymakers in adjusting the curriculum to better meet teachers' needs and enhance EFL education in Indonesia.

E. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in several theoretical perspectives that underpin its key components. To begin with, teachers' beliefs, as described by Kagan (1992), Teacher beliefs are deeply held assumptions, values, and attitudes that influence classroom decisions, instructional practices, and teacher-student interactions. Specifically, these beliefs, particularly those concerning student-centered learning and differentiation, directly influence how teachers address diverse student needs. Furthermore, Kurikulum Merdeka, a progressive educational framework introduced by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, represents a significant shift towards more flexible, personalized, and student-centered learning (Kemendikbud, 2021). The Kurikulum Merdeka aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory, which emphasizes active knowledge construction and the importance of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this regard, the curriculum's focus on flexibility and student-centered learning encourages teachers to adopt differentiated instruction.

Moreover, Tomlinson's (2001) framework on differentiated instruction highlights the significance of tailoring content, processes, and products to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the EFL context, this notion aligns with Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, which asserts that students acquire language most effectively when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level. However, despite its advantages, the

implementation of differentiation in EFL classrooms is not without challenges. According to Fullan's (1991) theory of educational change, systemic barriers such as limited time, resources, and professional support can significantly hinder the effective application of differentiated instruction.

To address these obstacles, DuFour et al.'s (2008) collaborative professional learning approach emphasizes the importance of peer collaboration in improving instructional practices. Additionally, Mishra and Koehler's (2006) TPACK Framework underscores the pivotal role of technology in facilitating personalized learning experiences. Taken together, these theoretical insights provide a comprehensive foundation for examining how teachers' beliefs about Kurikulum Merdeka influence their approaches to differentiation and the strategies they employ to overcome challenges in implementing it effectively.

F. Research Scope

This study examines the impact of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' beliefs about Kurikulum Merdeka on their teaching practices in secondary schools, particularly in relation to differentiated instruction adaptation. The research is confined to two seasoned EFL educators from SMPN 17 Bandung and SMPN 8 Bandung, each possessing over 20 years of instructional experience and actively engaged in curriculum implementation. It investigates their viewpoints on how the flexible, student-centered framework of Kurikulum Merdeka influences their instructional methods, the obstacles encountered in tailoring lessons for varied learners, and the strategies employed to overcome these challenges. The study concentrates on English as a Foreign Language instruction at the junior high school tier and excludes other subjects or educational stages.

G. Previous Studies

Several relevant research studies have examined teachers' beliefs regarding the instruction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and differentiated instruction, especially in the context of Kurikulum Merdeka. These studies establish a basis for comprehending the challenges, strategies, and outcomes related to these educational frameworks. The following are summaries of pivotal

studies pertinent to the focus of this research. First, a study by Maruf (2023) analyzed the impact of teachers' beliefs and attitudes on their capacity to carry out differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to examine the correlation between educators' beliefs and their instructional practices. The data analysis revealed a strong correlation between positive teacher beliefs and the successful application of differentiated methods. Teachers who had received professional development training in differentiation were more confident and adept at managing diverse learner needs. The findings highlighted the significant role of teacher attitudes in shaping effective instructional practices. Teachers with positive attitudes toward differentiated instruction were more likely to implement it successfully. This study underscores the importance of ongoing professional development and the role of teacher beliefs in fostering an inclusive learning environment.

Second, Astuti et al. (2023) explored the views of junior high school teachers and students on differentiated instruction under Kurikulum Merdeka. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study gathered data through interviews and classroom observations. The analysis focused on identifying common themes related to the effectiveness of differentiated practices. The research indicated that educators regarded differentiated instruction, which involves adjusting instructional phases to address varying abilities, as exceptionally effective in enhancing student engagement and addressing learning obstacles. Students also gave positive feedback, saying that these methods made learning more accessible and engaging. The study suggests that differentiated instruction has the potential to effectively address individual learning needs, but it must be implemented consistently and thoughtfully. This study emphasizes the role of teacher perceptions in the successful adoption of differentiated practices, arguing that both teacher training and classroom support are required for effective implementation.

Third, the study was conducted by Pertiwi and Pusparini (2021), this study explored vocational high school English teachers' views on the Merdeka Belajar curriculum and its role in differentiated instruction. Using semi-structured

interviews and classroom observations, the study identified themes related to teachers' beliefs and challenges in applying differentiated methods. While teachers saw the curriculum's potential, many struggled due to a lack of resources and training. Teachers who were confident in differentiation emphasized flexibility and student-centered learning, whereas those with less experience struggled to manage diverse learner needs. The study emphasizes the importance of increased teacher support and professional development to ensure successful curriculum implementation.

These studies provide a useful foundation for understanding how teachers' beliefs impact their instructional methods within the context of differentiated instruction. While they address key aspects such as teacher attitudes, challenges, and strategies, there remains a gap in exploring how these beliefs specifically influence day-to-day teaching practices under Kurikulum Merdeka. The current study aims to close this gap by focusing on experienced junior high school EFL teachers' perceptions and how they adapt their methods to align with differentiated curriculum principles. This study aims to extend previous research findings by providing more in-depth insights into the practical realities of implementing Kurikulum Merdeka in a variety of educational settings.